

Passive voice? Then it ain't an apology



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The Virginian-Pilot

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The Virginian-Pilot
© August 1, 2008

It's easy. Really. Just two little words: I'm sorry.

You don't need anything else. You don't even need to explain what you did - unless you're one of my kids, and I'm trying to make a point about your behavior. You don't have to add any subordinate clauses leaking the air out of what's otherwise a clean, declarative statement: I'm sorry.

We've known those two little words (2-1/2 if you count the contraction) all our lives. And yet I defy you to find a politician who can actually say them. Ordinarily, that just makes them oily, and makes me hold my wallet.

But in this, probably the most apologetic political season in American history, it makes me want to scream. For more than a year now, politics has been hijacked by aggrieved pretenders demanding apologies from someone or other, right now, while the cameras roll.

It's a tired and true tactic of political hacks: Demand an apology. Force the other guy onto his heels, keep the offense in the news another cycle or three.

This kind of thing might be good politics, but it is horrible manners. If someone apologizes to you, it is considered poor form to berate him for his transgression, or even to mention it. In the chatter media, this is known as programming.

But the problem is not that politics - and talk radio and TV - is populated by people without manners. It's that these people have forgotten how to actually apologize.

Try this one, from our letters to the editor: "At a recent City Council meeting, remarks were made that were not consistent with our views on race relations and do not reflect the thoughts of our body."

That comes from a letter signed by the Portsmouth City Council, including Mayor James Holley. His offense - saying the city-backed Portsmouth Renaissance Hotel has "my black picture in the lobby, but it's a white hotel" - has the city in an uproar.

As modern apologies go, it was the mildest sort of rebuke, resembling nothing so much as Richard Nixon's famous line about his own high crimes: "Mistakes were made."

I had higher hopes when I heard that Holley himself was going to write. Then I read his letter, which concluded with these familiar words: "If my remarks have been hurtful to anyone in any manner, I am truly sorry."

That's not an apology. That is a peculiar breed of political doublespeak that sounds like an apology but isn't one. Read carefully: Holley is only really sorry that his remarks upset people, or - if I'm being uncharitable - because he got caught saying them.

It's like me apologizing to you because this column left you confused, instead of apologizing for the quality of my prose. (If the column makes you mad, I take no responsibility, and I ain't sorry.)

I don't mean to pick on Holley. Readers are doing just fine without me. Plus, he's only doing what countless politicians before him have done.

But I have to say I don't understand what people like the mayor hope to accomplish with weasel words like those. Everyone sees right through such pseudo-apologies, which means they satisfy no one, especially not the aggrieved.

A politician using them doesn't even get the satisfaction of knowing he did the right thing - apologizing for a transgression - because he did precisely the wrong thing. And then he tried to pretend he didn't. So now he's got even more things to apologize for.

Here's a simpler idea.

Instead of all this elaborate circumlocution and obfuscation, all this linguistic dodging, perhaps American politicians ought to try a simple "I'm sorry," and maybe we ought to give them room to move on after they make mistakes. That is, after all, what a simple apology is supposed to permit, even encourage.

It's also what our politics, I'm sorry to say, are missing.

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